

TIME

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THE WORLD

PERS: Prince SIHANOUK

POL 2 CAMBODIA



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SIHANOUK & DIPLOMATIC GUESTS

In the shadow from the north, a time for the Storm Spirit.

SOUTHEAST ASIA

The Prince & the Dragon

(See Cover)

It was a great party. After the French champagne and the Viennese waltzes came Bopha Devi, prima ballerina of the Royal Cambodian Ballet. Sinuous and shimmering, dressed in green and gold, she danced a ritual dance in bare feet. When she accidentally dropped her ring, a woman seryant slithered across the parquet floor on her belly to pick it up lest Bopha bruise herself.

Bopha is the daughter of Cambodia's Prince Sihanouk, who was the proud host. Graciously he explained the theme of the dance to the spectators: it concerned the encounter of Moni Mékhâla, Goddess of Waters, with Ream Eysa, the Storm Spirit. If the mythology was a little confusing, that was only what the world had come to expect of His Royal Highness Norodom Sihanouk Varman, Cambodia's Retired King, Commander in Chief, Supreme National Leader of Buddhism—and known to some unkind Western detractors as "Snookie."

The reference to the Storm Spirit was appropriate enough. Even as the party honoring the visiting French ambassador to Laos was in progress, Sihanouk's government was whipping up a propaganda campaign against the U.S., built around the preceding week's incident along the frontier between Cambodia and South Viet Nam.

Pursuing some Communist Viet Cong guerrillas who had fled across the ill-patrolled and ill-marked border, South Vietnamese T-28s had bombed the village of Chantrea, four miles inside Cambodia; the planes were followed on the ground by South Viet Nam troops accompanied by U.S. advisers. At least 17 Cambodians were killed. Both the U.S. and South Viet Nam apologized for

the unfortunate incident, a part of the even more unfortunate, long and deadly war in Viet Nam. But Sihanouk plastered horror pictures on every available wall and took to the radio in his terrier's tenor, accusing the U.S. of masterminding the attack. The Prince demanded that Washington pay reparations, including "one bulldozer or a powerful tractor for each of our dead."

Upstaging the Cold War. To demonstrate Cambodian neutrality, 13 of the Viet Cong fighters who had taken refuge in Cambodia were sentenced to one year of "rest" in prison. Then Sihanouk took off in his French helicopter to go village-hopping, make speeches, and shower bolts of cloth and other gifts from his chopper upon the amazed peasants below. Sihanouk also continued a shrill diplomatic campaign that seems to assume that Cambodia, with its 5,500,000 people—a country known to many Westerners only vaguely as the locale of the magnificent, slumbering old temples of Angkor Wat—is somehow at the heart of the international scene and the center of the cold war.

What Sihanouk has been demanding for weeks is a 14-nation conference, preferably at Geneva, representing the major powers and his Southeast Asian neighbors, to guarantee Cambodian neutrality and settle some local border disputes. At various times, he announced he would (and would not) settle for a four-power meeting instead; proposed (and called off) two-power talks directly with South Viet Nam; set a deadline (and postponed it) for the convening of the 14-power conference; berated the U.S. and Britain for dragging their feet on the conference proposal. The U.S. opposes a large conference mostly to entangle it in propaganda maneuvers concerning the war in South Viet Nam.

From Moscow Nikita Khrushchev sent a message supporting the conference plan. And Charles de Gaulle, offering to work for a compromise, in a letter to Sihanouk counseled patience in the year's most magnificent diplomatic hyperbole: "I trust in the calm wisdom of Your Royal Highness."

In the meantime, His Royal Highness kept threatening: "I will go to Peking." Unless he gets satisfaction on his conference proposal, he said, he would reluctantly take Cambodia out of its neutralist position and move over into the Communist camp.

Maximum Trouble. The U.S. is not precisely quaking at the prospect. Cambodia already serves in effect as a refuge, staging area and partial supply line for the Viet Cong; although Sihanouk officially denies this, he unofficially promises that if he gets his way on the conference, he will then keep Cambodia from being so used. A formal tie with Red China, which he already calls "our No. 1 friend and protector," would aggravate but need not seriously affect the Vietnamese war. Besides, there is evidence that Red China does not really want a close embrace with Sihanouk, that it prefers the present situation in which Peking carries a minimum of responsibility for Cambodia while the little country causes a maximum amount of trouble for the West.

Then why not leave Sihanouk to his theatrics and ignore him? To some extent this is precisely what the U.S. is doing—to Sihanouk's mounting irritation. His vanity was particularly hurt when Bobby Kennedy failed to drop in during his recent trip to Malaysia. The temptation to write off Sihanouk as a temperamental dilettante and his country as a Far Eastern comic-opera setting is strong. To many, Sihanouk appears so eccentric that, as one Western diplomat puts it, "everyone wants to be his psychiatrist." Various theories have been developed to account for his



CAMBODIANS VIEWING PHOTOS

After the horror show ...

Continued